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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [CN](#)

SUBJECT: Six Months Of Enhanced Engagement In The Comoros

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Since July, 2008, Post has had a dedicated Comoros Officer spending three-quarters of his time on extended TDYs in the Comoros. This cable highlights the positive reaction from the Comoros and improved efforts to pursue Mission objectives. END SUMMARY.

U.S. Presence "Promotes Stability"

¶2. (SBU) Former President Azali told us plainly, "U.S. presence in the Comoros promotes stability." Although he took power in a coup in 1999, Azali is widely respected for reuniting the country then peacefully stepping aside after President Sambi's election in 2006. Echoing this view, Foreign Minister Jaffar told AF/E Director Knight that the presence of an American diplomat and expected embassy reopening "moves us from a dream to hope." An American professor active in the Comoros since the 1960s welcomed the new U.S. policy of engagement, emphasizing that for Comorans, the United States represents possibility and opportunity. He lamented the growing influence of Iran and "other interests" in the Comoros in the last decade and said many Comoran elders share his views. In particular, the professor encouraged our efforts, included at the American Corner and under a USAID-education project, to promote English. He said for Comorans, English language skills are viewed as opening a new world of opportunities to improve their livelihoods at home and abroad.

¶3. (SBU) As the Ambassador, Comoros Officer, and other Mission personnel have traveled to communities throughout the three islands, sharing our ambition to reopen a modest embassy, we have met universal appreciation. Official and private Comorans felt "abandoned" by the embassy closure in the mid-1990s and strongly believe that renewed American engagement bodes well for the country's future.

Bilateral Relations

¶4. (SBU) The "Bilateral Commission" established by AF A/S Frazer and President Sambi is taken quite seriously by the GOC, who greatly appreciated the welcome they received at the second session in Washington in September, 2008. The Comoros Officer has offered GOC officials opportunity for dialogue, follow-up, and working level discussion on the many issues on the bilateral agenda, from food security, to education, health, and security cooperation. Via the Comoros Officer, GOC officials in many sectors have ready access to their American counterparts at the Embassy in Antananarivo, at regional offices, at the Department, and other interested agencies. A key example was Post's effort to inform Washington about GOC initiatives to qualify for IMF Emergency Post Conflict Assistance, with was approved with United States support in December, 2008.

¶5. (SBU) The Comoros Officer also had the opportunity to advance the Mission objective to consolidate stable democracy and promote reconciliation in the Comoros in the African Union-led effort to organize an "inter-island dialogue." Though this process is presently stalled by Comoran political maneuvering, the African Union, French, and UN diplomats praised the United States'

engagement on delivering strong messages to the Union government and the opposition to reach compromise for the good of the country. Union government and opposition leaders alike were candid in acknowledging the legitimacy and weight of United States participation in this effort. That said, President Sambi is moving forward with a constitutional referendum and has announced his desire to extend his mandate one year until 2011; there are limits to what our enhanced engagement can accomplish.

Public Diplomacy

16. (SBU) Replacing short and intermittent visits with longer, three-weeks-per-month TDYs has created time for a more robust public diplomacy program in the Comoros, taking advantage in particular of a dynamic American Corner in Moroni frequented by hundreds of young Comorans each week. The Comoros Officer has supplemented events by the Ambassador and other visiting Embassy officials with numerous outreach activities. We conducted multiple "Islam in America" events to mark Ramadan as well as several events on the U.S. presidential election. Hundreds of Comorans readily turn up for these events, eager to learn more and in particular to actively participate asking questions about the United States. Attendees at the American Corner asked for repeat events at the main square in Moroni, which they organized, and where over 200 elders, community leaders, and other Comorans turned up for an extended presentation and question/answer session with the Comoros Officer. Extended staff time in the Comoros has also offered opportunities to reach the half of the population who live on the islands of Moheli and Anjouan - remote islands in an already remote country. In short, Comorans are eager for contact with Americans and the new Comoros Officer position allows us to reach many moderate and receptive Muslims in this poor country of some 700,000 people.

U.S. Mission Management

17. (SBU) The dedicated Comoros Officer position has allowed increased and more in-depth Post reporting on the Comoros, covering a wide range of topics including: political reconciliation, France's efforts on the Mayotte issue, Iran in the Comoros, challenges for economic development, the investment climate, human rights issues, and the interests of other diplomatic and international missions.

18. (SBU) Post has a critical mass of activities in the Comoros that benefit from day-to-day oversight by the Comoros Officer in Moroni. In recent months, on-the-ground coordination with Combined-Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa Civil Affairs teams numbering over 20 men and women has been greatly improved; we participate in each others' events, meet together with Comoran officials, and work through challenges. The Comoros Officer is also the "American face" for the USAID teacher-training project, managed by a locally hired coordinator and funded at USD 500,000 over the next two years. Our education partners and the public in general more readily identify this program with the United States by virtue of official American participation in events such as workshops and project launches; the Comoros Officer also serves as the eyes and ears for USAID project managers based in Antananarivo. The Comoros Officer will play a similar role for a two-year USD 350,000 microfinance project. Beyond our major initiatives, extended TDYs in the Comoros have improved management and impact of the Ambassador's Special Self-Help Program - which tripled in size this year -- as well as creating an opportunity to propose a project for the Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund.

Future Outlook

19. (SBU) Once Department approvals are in place, we expect the GOC to actively facilitate our efforts to reopen a U.S. diplomatic facility in the Comoros. Our Comoran counterparts view the embassy reopening as an acknowledgement that the country is relevant and on the right track, and our influence is correspondingly large. With plans for a permanent officer based in the Comoros as of the 2009 summer transfer season, Post expects to build on our successful first year of intensified engagement in the Comoros. The top deliverable would be the return of the Peace Corps to the Comoros,

always at the top of President Sambi's -- and virtually every other Comoran official's -- list of priorities.

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